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LITERARY MEN AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS.

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS.

IN one of the later decades of the nineteenth century, a politician who felt himself to be pre-eminently practical sought to dismiss all further consideration of a certain proposed measure by the discourteous assertion that it was advocated only by a lot of "those d——d literary fellows." This practical politician probably prided himself on being one of the plain people; and, no doubt, he believed that he was appealing to a wide-spread prejudice. Certainly, he would have been as deeply pained as he would have been astonished could he have foreseen the second administration of the twentieth century, when the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, the Ambassador of the French Republic and, later, the Ambassador of the British Empire, should be, all of them, "literary fellows." Had he survived to behold this strange coincidence, it would not have been easy for him to account for the high esteem in which Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Hay, M. Jusserand and Mr. Bryce, were held by the practical politicians and by the plain people also.

Yet there may be profit for men of letters, as a class, if we take time to ask ourselves what underlay the distrust of this practical politician, and to inquire what warrant he had for it and what support he might hope to find in the opinion of the average man upon whose sympathy the professional office-seeker must ever rely. And we may begin by admitting that this plain-spoken spoilsman was only voicing an opinion long-standing and wide-spread. However inexplicable it may seem to us, it is a fact that both the plain people and the practical politicians have often displayed a certain suspicion toward the "literary fellow"; and they have often acted on the belief that he was likely to be little better than an impractical theorist. This is no new thing;

Machiavelli, for example, was a man of letters, with the acutest insight into practical politics as the game was played in his time and in his country; and yet the code of practice which he drew up for the guidance of his Prince was not rewarded by the gift of responsible office. The little Italian republics of the Renaissance,—like the great American Republic centuries later,—often availed themselves of their men of letters as envoys to other Powers; but they rarely entrusted these “literary fellows” with positions of authority. However ably and adroitly Dante and Boccaccio and Petrarch might acquit themselves of their missions abroad, they were not rewarded at home by being made rulers of men. And here in the United States, while we have been glad to see ourselves worthily represented in foreign parts by Bancroft and by Motley, by Irving and by Lowell, we have not often been moved to elect men of letters to high office in the nation or in the State; and, even when we have seemed to choose them for office, the election has generally gone to a statesman who was also an author rather than to an author who was also a statesman. The fervid rhetorician who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the historian of the “Winning of the West” are the only men of letters who have ever risen to the Presidency; and their interest in politics is acuter than their interest in authorship.

In the opening chapter of Cooper’s “Pathfinder” an old sailor on a trip through the woods is told by an Indian that the smoke they see curling above the trees must come from a fire made by a white man, since it is denser than it should be, because it arises from wood wetter than any fuel a redskin would ever use. “Tuscarora too cunning to make fire with water,” the Indian explains; “pale-face too much book and burn anything; much book, little know.” And the old sailor readily admits that this is reasonable, and that “the chief has sensible notions of things in his own way.” A little later in the same tale Leatherstocking himself declares that he never “believed much in the learning of them that dwell in towns, for I never yet met with one that had an eye for a rifle or a trail.” What is this but a belated echo of Festus’s saying, “Too much learning hath made thee mad”?

Perhaps a part of the hostility toward Cooper himself, which was rampant about 1840, was due to the disgust of the journalists of that provincial period evoked by the spectacle of a man of letters, a mere teller of tales, who ventured to hold firmly and

to express frankly opinions of his own about the social order, about politics, and about statecraft. These were themes which the newspaper men reserved for themselves and which no "literary fellow" had a right to meddle with. The journalists of those days may have been irritated by Cooper's plain speech and by his curt contempt; but they had a deeper grievance. They deemed it a gross piece of impertinence for a novelist to stray from his story-telling, and they bade him "stick to his last." So the practical politicians of a New England State recently waxed indignant at the interference of one of Cooper's disciples as a historical novelist when this story-teller made bold to protest against political conditions which seemed to him intolerable.

It is only fair to admit unhesitatingly that there is not a little to be urged in behalf of this belief that men of letters often go off half-cocked when they see fit to discuss political affairs. They often obtrude political opinions which are not the cautious result of a deliberate examination of the whole situation. Perhaps the novelist and the poet are inclined to be somewhat impractical; and perhaps they are not more likely than any other member of the community to be gifted with political sagacity and with statesmanlike insight into the needs of the future. Perhaps, too, many "literary fellows" are wont to take themselves too seriously, and to claim that their possession of "the vision and the faculty divine" makes them wiser than the rest of the world. Even poets and novelists of indisputable rank have often revealed themselves fantastic and absurd in their rash adventures into political speculation. In the ideal communities they have vaguely glimpsed, there is frequently a thin unreality. They are wont to balloon themselves up into a rarefied atmosphere where the ordinary man cannot breathe. The plain people would have been sadly misguided had they attempted to take their politics from Shelley, for one, or from Balzac, for another; nor would they have found a much more solid support in Hugo or in Hawthorne. Cooper stands out as an exception among later poets and novelists, in that he had thought seriously about the organization of society.

It is in his delightful biography of the author of the *Leatherstocking Tales* that Professor Lounsbury has occasion to refer to the alleged poet Percival, and the witty critic tells us that, as this versifier "invariably proved himself entirely destitute of common sense in his ordinary conduct, he was led to fancy that

he was not only a man of ability, but a man of genius." Not a few crude geniuses seem to have accepted the theory implied that genius is always crude. And not a few of those who ought to know better lazily consent to this false view, admitting a plea of the irresponsibility of genius as an adequate excuse for the weaknesses of Poe and Coleridge and for the vagaries of Musset and Villon. But nothing ought to be clearer than that real genius never shirks responsibility, and that it is ever buttressed by common sense. The truly great men have been idealists who had a sustaining grasp on the realities of life. Sophocles, for example, was entrusted with command in battle; and Milton was charged with the delicate duties of diplomatic correspondence.

A mandarin complacency is not a characteristic of the truly great man of letters. Rather is it the truly small "literary fellow" who is likely to reveal an insufferable self-sufficiency, and to assume that his gift of expression supplies him also with opinions worth expressing. The narrow-mindedness of the mere "literary fellow" of this shallow species was never more cruelly self-exposed than in the journal of the Goncourts. They had a pretty gift of description and even a certain felicity of sentimental analysis; but they were appallingly ignorant and fundamentally unintelligent. They were absolutely incapable of apprehending a stimulating generalization; and yet their marvellous conceit prevented their seeing the pitiful figure they presented at the Magny dinners when Taine and Renan were discussing questions of large importance. Not only were their minds hermetically closed to a new idea, but they were actually unaware that it was new and that it was an idea.

Even in discussing his own special art, the poet or the novelist may disclose his sharp limitations. While many of the most suggestive and inspiring of æsthetic essays have been due to the pens of the practitioners of the several arts, Fromentin and La Farge, for instance, Stevenson and Howells,—artists who happened also to possess a keen insight into the principles of their crafts,—the large majority of the treatises on poetry and on fiction written by the poets themselves, and by the novelists, are devoid of any real value. The writers reveal the fact that, even though they may have the gift of the lyrist or of the story-teller, they lack the gift of the critic. These articles prove once again that the artist does not need to know more about his art than

how to practise it, and that he may himself apply his principles, unconsciously and yet satisfactorily, although he is quite unable to formulate them for others, in default of the philosophic endowment which is not a necessary part of the artistic equipment.

Mrs. Siddons and Salvini were great actors beyond all question; but the papers they prepared on the art of acting were entirely without significance. Victor Hugo was the foremost of French poets; but his famous manifesto of revolt, the preface to "*Cromwell*," in which he sought to declare a body of doctrine and to lay down the law of poetic evolution, is a revelation of his incapacity for critical thought. So also the series of strenuous essays in which Zola, a novelist of epic power, undertook to forecast the development of fiction shows that he failed to understand even his own method. Now, if these artists and these men of letters are sometimes discovered to be hopelessly at sea when they set out to consider their own special departments of human endeavor, how much more astray are they likely to find themselves when they go outside the boundaries of their own calling!

It was in his incisive essay on Shakespeare that Bagehot, shrewdest of observers, was moved to explain "the reason why so few good books are written." He asserted that it was because "so few people that can write know anything. In general, an author has always lived in a room, has read books, has cultivated science, is acquainted with the style and sentiments of the best authors; but he is out of the way of employing his own eyes and ears. He has nothing to hear and nothing to see. His life is a vacuum." This may seem harsh; but it is not unjust to a large proportion of mere "literary fellows." They know little or nothing except books. They have cultivated the means of expression; but they have to express only what they may find in their libraries. They do not know the world beyond their bookshelves. They are men of letters, not men of action; and often they are not men of thought. When one of them happens to have a doctrine he can so wing his message with flame that it reaches the hearts of men; and this is what made Rousseau so powerful and so dangerous. And, on the other hand, when the man of action happens also to have the gift of expression, we get one of the books the world will not willingly let die,—the "*Commentaries*" of Cæsar, the autobiography of Cellini or the "*Memoirs*" of Grant.

The attitude of the practical politician and of the plain people

is thus seen to have a certain justification in the frequent willingness of "literary fellows" to declare opinions which are not the result of study and of acquaintance with the subject, and which therefore had better not be made public. To say this is to suggest that the man of letters who uses his power of expression as though it gave him a right to speak with authority about themes to which he has paid only superficial attention is really a traitor to his craft, in that he exposes the whole guild of authors to a contempt which is not without excuse,

Although it may be confessed that "literary fellows" have not infrequently laid themselves open to the reproach of talking when they really had nothing to say, it needs to be noted that some portion of the vague distrust of the plain people here in the United States has had another origin. It seems to be a survival of our inheritance from early Colonial conditions, when the sturdy settler had more or less reason to look with suspicion on all possessors of superior education as likely to be supporters of the aristocratic tradition which he was striving to disestablish. "In the minds not only of the Pilgrims and the Puritans, but also and in even stronger degree in those of the Quakers, the Huguenots and the Palatinate Germans intellectual activity that went beyond the limits set by theology or practical politics was associated with culture," so Professor Giddings has reminded us; and "culture was associated with leisure, opportunity, worldly indulgence. These, in turn, were associated with oppression." The same acute observer suspects that there was a feeling of hostility to worldly learning in the early American days that partook of class-conscious antagonism; "to be overmuch interested in merely intellectual pursuits was to be in a degree disloyal to the common cause."

Closely akin to this easily understood hostility,—which is not in itself unworthy,—there is another inherited feeling born of our primitive conditions and still surviving here and there long after these conditions have departed. In a new community, fraying its way in a new land as best it can, every one must do everything for himself; since there is no one at hand to do it for him. There can be no division of labor, no specialization of function; and every man is compelled to be a Jack of all trades. This breeds in the race self-reliant resourcefulness; it stimulates ingenuity and inventiveness. Men forced to find out new ways of

doing old things are trained to face an emergency and to front the unexpected need. This undaunted facility in turning one's hand to anything is now a developed characteristic of the American people, and it is one of our most precious assets in the economic struggle for the markets of the world.

But this transmitted inheritance has one obvious disadvantage. It tends to spread abroad a belief that any man can do anything about as well as any other man can do it. It leads to the assumption that any man is fit for any post. It makes us contemptuous of all special knowledge and resentful of all expert advice. It accentuates the suspicion which the average man of our English-speaking stock has been wont to show toward the "theorist," and which has often tempted him to the overt absurdity of declaring that certain things "may be all very well in theory, but they won't work!"

Once more candor compels the confession that now and again the practical man's contempt for the theorist has been intensified by the occasional mistakes of these experts, who were not quite so expert as they thought themselves. Once upon a time a theorist proved to his own satisfaction that a ship could not possibly cross the Atlantic under steam because it never could carry coal enough. And a later theorist was moved to explain that an ice-yacht could not possibly go faster than the wind.

It has happened, also, that rule-of-thumb readiness has sometimes achieved an immediate result not so swiftly attained by a more scientific thoroughness. In the early days of the Civil War a General halted his troops on the banks of a river half a mile wide, ordered his engineers to make plans for a bridge, and informed a New England Colonel that the building of the bridge would be confided to the Yankee regiment. The next afternoon the Colonel called on the General, who told him that the engineers would soon have the plans ready. The Colonel smiled as he answered: "I don't much care about the pictures; you see, my boys have got the bridge built!"

In a community where this sort of thing could happen there need be no wonder that the practical man was impatient of the theorists and of the experts. He was sufficient to himself, and he had no use for them. But as backwoods conditions disappeared, division of labor had to appear. Specialization of function is the mark of advancing civilization. There is no better evidence of

our progress than the avidity with which the practical men in charge of our mighty industrial enterprises are now seeking out experts and snapping up all the theorists within reach. And the results of this broadening of vision are increasingly evident outside the field of industry. The American public is apparently awakening to the fact that its servants had better be trained for service, and that its consuls, for instance, will be able to benefit the commerce of the country more amply if they have been forced to fit themselves for their special work.

Probably this broadening of vision will sooner or later effect a wholesome change in the attitude of the plain people toward the expert, the theorist and the "literary fellow." Possibly it may even modify the curiously inaccurate opinion which the average man seems to have as to the College Professors. This opinion is, apparently, a survival from the days when any superannuated clergyman was accepted as an adequate occupant for any chair in any institution of learning. Half a century ago the programme of studies in all of our colleges was narrow and rigid; and anybody who had taken the course in his youth held himself ready in his old age to give instruction in any of the prescribed studies. A little more than a score of years ago, whenever any chair at Columbia College happened to fall vacant, an application was promptly presented by a certain aged alumnus who proffered himself as the proper person for the post, equally willing to impart instruction in Greek or in mathematics, in chemistry or in history. While this worthy clergyman failed of his appointment at Columbia, there were other men no better equipped who did secure chairs in other institutions, as though to confirm the departed belief that those who had failed in everything else were at least capable of teaching.

The programme of studies has been enormously extended of late, and it now covers many new subjects,—biology, sociology, psychology,—as to which the man in the street can have only the haziest notions. With the usual conceit of ignorance, he is unwilling to take the unknown for the magnificent. Only too often is he inclined to dismiss these new sciences as futile, and to hold those who teach these novel subjects as vain triflers not to be taken seriously. And here once more the fault is sometimes to be laid at the door of the professors themselves, rather than at that of the plain people. Now and again one of them, not re-

strained by the caution his scientific training ought to have instilled in him, rashly adventures himself in fields in which his own special knowledge gives him no advantage, and in which he himself is no wiser than the average man. It would be a sorry spectacle to see a Professor of Rhetoric holding forth on hypnotism, or a Professor of Experimental Psychology emitting empty opinions about the condition of English orthography and about the administration of the criminal law. Bumptious outpourings of this type cannot fail to bring a certain discredit upon scholarship itself, and to confirm the man in the street in a contemptuous distrust of the man of science.

Professor Lounsbury has reminded us that general information is often but another name for scientific ignorance. And the reverse of this is true also, since special knowledge is not infrequently accompanied by a lack of general information. Excessive specialization may lead to excessive narrowness of vision; and a professor, scientifically trained in Germany and conscientiously confining himself to the dative case, may go through life without ever attaining that knowledge of the world and that wider outlook upon life which a broad education ought to have bestowed.

While there are a few professors here and there who are lacking in breadth, and while there are also a few who are not afraid to go out of their depth at the risk of floundering in muddy water, a large majority of the men who now hold the more important chairs in our more important universities have not allowed their scholarship to crush them. They are scholars, first of all, of course, and this they should be; but they are also good citizens seriously interested in the teeming life about them and taking a manly part in the movement for social uplift. They profit by their academic detachment from the business of making money to attain a wider perspective. They tend to be idealists, like the men of letters; they want to peer into the future, and to relate what must be done to-day with what will have to be done to-morrow. Therefore, they are likely to be dissatisfied with the makeshift devices of the practical politicians, who often seek only to remove the symptoms of a distemper in the body politic without regard to the real cause of the disease.

As they have no hesitation in expressing their disapproval of quack legislation, they are likely to come into frequent collision with both the business man who wants an evil condition remedied

in a hurry and with the professional politician who is swift to pass any act which he thinks the people want regardless of its ultimate effect. And here is a solid reason for the hostility they often arouse. The practical man of affairs, whether in business or in politics, is prone to take short views, and to hold that sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. He is an opportunist; and he is moved to wrath when the professors provoke him by their calm assertion that no pill has ever yet cured the earthquake.

While the well-meaning man who wishes to have everything made better overnight is offended by the disinterested attitude taken by the College Professor and by the "literary fellow" toward public questions, the man who is actually profiting by present conditions is fiercely resentful. He is belligerent in defending his own, and he is sceptical as to the disinterestedness of his opponents. He impugns their good faith; he imputes unworthy motives; and he relieves his feelings by lumping the "literary fellow" and the College Professor in a comprehensive anathema. And here he exhibits class-conscious antagonism, but it is too frankly selfish not to defeat itself by self-disclosure.

It is an evidence of the common sense of the American people that the prejudice against the College Professors, like that against the men of letters, is rapidly dying down, and that there is beginning to be public recognition and public appreciation of the service they are rendering to the Commonwealth. This recognition is displayed in the increasing frequency with which their advice and their aid are sought in solving the problems of society, and in the greater weight which is attached to their opinions upon the subjects they have studied. This appreciation is due partly to the fact that the public is at last discovering the improvement in the quality of the professors in consequence of the development of the American university, more especially in the larger urban communities; and it is partly due to a growing understanding of the real value of the expert and the theorist.

It is easy to give striking instances of this increasing reliance of the public upon the university for expert aid; and perhaps I may be pardoned if I present a few of them from the recent history of the institution with which I am most familiar. Probably it would not be difficult to select examples as significant from the later experiences of any other of the larger universities in the larger cities. The admirable school-law of New York, now in-

incorporated in the charter of the city, was due largely to the skill and foresight of one Columbia Professor; and another Columbia Professor was a member of the Commission which prepared the charter itself. A third sat on the Commission for revising the tax system of the State; and a fourth had a seat in the Panama Canal Commission. A fifth went out to San Francisco to take charge of the relief work immediately after the earthquake; and a sixth had to ask for leave twice,—first, to act as Assistant-Secretary of State; and, second, to serve as Secretary of the Commission which signed the treaty of peace between Spain and the United States. Two of my colleagues have recently declined calls to take charge of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, while a third has accepted the presidency of the Carnegie Institution.

It would be easy, also, to bring forward many instances of the practical efficiency of men of letters. One "literary fellow," in New York, laid the solid foundation of tenement-house reform. Another, in Washington, prevented the dismemberment of the Chinese Empire. A third established the Naval Academy at Annapolis against the protests of the practical politicians of his time. It was a "literary fellow," risen to be Prime Minister of Great Britain, who had the daring imagination which led him to acquire control of the Suez Canal, and thus to bring about the supremacy of his country over Egypt. And it is to the undying honor of the men of letters of France,—the so-called "intellectuals,"—that, in the blackest hours of the Dreyfus iniquity, they stepped forward to insist on the duty of doing right even though the heavens should fall.

We can see a good augury for the future in the prominent position now awarded by public opinion in America to the College President. The more or less tolerant contempt which the average man has sometimes displayed toward the mere Professor he has never felt toward the President. He knows little enough about the work of the Professor and about the needful qualifications for any particular chair; but he cannot help perceiving that the President must be a man of affairs, having a knowledge of the practical things of life, such as the president of a bank or of a railroad needs must have. Probably the man in the street would not be greatly surprised if he should be reminded that one University President was formerly the editor of a leading

railroad paper, or if he should be informed that another University President had declined the presidency of an important trust company. Although the man in the street does not happen to know it, the American College President occupies a position without parallel in Europe; and this position, lofty and detached, gives him a platform from which to speak with authority. Any one who will call the roll of the men now at the head of our older institutions of learning cannot fail to be struck with the fact that almost every one of them is a scholar, who is also far more than a mere scholar. And yet they are, all of them, professors who have been promoted from the ranks.

College Professor and "literary fellow," expert and theorist, seem at last to be coming into their own. It was in the old nineteenth century that the professional politician was guilty of the sneer which has served as a text for these random remarks. Long before the twenty-first century shall loom before us, we may expect to find that the man in the street will have experienced a change of heart. Perhaps we may even hope for a happy day when no smile will come to any lip on reading the cry of Napoleon's soldiers in Egypt as they formed square to repel the charge of the Mamelukes: "Asses and savans to the centre!"

But, in order that this change of opinion may be effected, it is incumbent on the "literary fellows" and the College Professors, on the theorists and the experts, so to control their utterances and so to direct their energies that the plain people will have no excuse for resuming again the suspicious attitude of bygone days. It will be their duty to seek to attain to the type of the cultivated man as set forth by President Eliot—"not a weak, critical, fastidious creature, vain of a little exclusive information or of an uncommon knack in Latin verse or mathematical logic," but "a man of quick perceptions, broad sympathies and wide affinities, responsive yet independent, self-reliant but deferential, loving truth and candor, but also moderation and proportion, courageous but gentle, not finished but perfecting." The closer we can come to this ideal, the less we shall fall behind that of Isocrates, who declared that by "an educated man" he understood "one who can deal with all that comes upon him day by day; who is honest and mannerly in society; who rules his desires; who is not spoiled by good fortune."

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